

'Godfather of Combatives' gives his all for Soldiers

Story by
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When Brian Sarjeant was on his last active duty assignment, he wondered what line of work he might pursue once he retired. Then his future became clear. He became an Army Combatives instructor and is now sometimes referred to as the "Godfather of Combatives" at Aberdeen Proving Ground.

Sarjeant, 42, retired as a sergeant first class in October 2007. His final assignment was in the Personnel Proponency Office at the U.S. Army Ordnance Center and Schools.

In 2005, Sarjeant was nominated by then-Regimental Command Sgt. Maj. Anthony Aubain to become a Combatives instructor. The training was conducted at Fort Benning, Ga.

"I never did marital arts, but CSM Aubain said, 'Hey, we got this combatives thing going on at Fort Benning and I thought about you.' I didn't know what it was, so I said, 'Fine,'" Sarjeant said.

"About a month went by and me and another guy headed to Benning, got trained up in Level 1, came back, and after another month went back for Level 2. At the same time we started teaching here. We had to be Level 2 certified in order to teach.

"We were teaching the Advanced NCO Course and Basic NCO Course at first, not the AIT Soldiers. In the early days we focused on NCOs.

"Then I went for Level 3 – and they start with boxing, and I'd never boxed before. We got down there and we're doing boxing everyday for a week -- full force striking, contact – everything. On Friday of the first week we were 'gonna have three fights.

"That Friday morning, me and the guy I was with looked at each other and said, 'What the hell are we doing here? We're welders!'

"Well, we went in and did the fights and did pretty well. We knew we were good when we went to the latrine and looked in the mirror. We didn't have black eyes or bloody lips, so we were good to go and gave each other thumbs up.

"Every Friday during Level 3 it was the same ritual. Whatever they were teaching, that's how we had to fight -- boxing, Mui Tai, stick fighting. And every Friday we had the same conversation about what were we doing there.

"And now we expose our AIT Soldiers to these

things."

"I've been in Combatives since it began," Sarjeant professes. "I was one of the first Level 3 Combatives instructors in the Ordnance Corps, and the first Level 4 instructor for the Ordnance Corps."

Since its inception a few years ago, Combatives are now taught – and embraced – at virtually every Army training installation.

"It's a hell of a program," Sarjeant says, emphatically. "It gives Soldiers self confidence. You know, most people are told to avoid conflicts all their life, but it's nice to know that when you confront someone -- when you deploy, or clear a house -- it's good to know that you can do this move and take care of yourself until your buddy can back you up."

Sarjeant recalls a scene from the movie "Saving Private Ryan" that drives home his point.

"There's a scene where a buddy was too afraid to help his buddy out. We don't want that to ever happen to our Soldiers," he said.

The Combatives program teaches survivability on the battlefield, Sarjeant said.

"When students leave here they should know exactly what they're doing. I don't think I've done my job unless they do," he said.

Sarjeant said instructor training is a vital part of the Combatives program.

"Level 1 is primary instruction, five days of program orientation. Ideally, every Soldier in the Army should be Level 1. Level 2 is a bit more (10 days/80 hours of instruction) and develops the instructor, giving you better understanding of Level 1 techniques.

"Level 3 and 4 are each 160 hours of training at Fort Benning. This level of instruction requires a professional commitment," Sarjeant added.

"The more you do it, the more you understand that you don't want to go out and pick a fight, because you don't know what this guy knows. It's basic self-defense that can help a Soldier out in a tough situation. It gives them the confidence to say, 'If I'm not gonna win the fight, at least I can hold the guy off until someone comes over to help me. I don't have to take the abuse that can hurt me, I can hold him off.'

"Combatives works on leverage and requires fitness, balance and quickness. We teach that you gotta be first, but if you're not first, here's a way out.

"I'm getting paid for it,

but I really stand behind the program because it's about people coming in, like timid females. About thirty days in you can see how much more confidence they've got," Sarjeant explained.

"I recently met a female who went through the program. She said, 'You know, a few weeks ago my husband beat me to within inches of my life. I thought I was gonna die. If I knew the things I know now, I would have been able to hold him off until someone came to help me out.'

"She felt really, really confident that she could now go back and defend herself," Sarjeant said.

"My greatest reward," the godfather continues, "is that I can train someone for six weeks and that last week they almost get what you're teaching them. Then the tournament comes and they pull it off. That's the big reward. That's something I did that helped them out. Just seeing the confidence come out in them... it's gratifying," he said.

"And then, when they get their medals and awards, they wear 'em all day. You see 'em in the PX and they're so proud. To me, it's like, 'I trained that guy.

"Then you see the smallest guy you trained and it's worth all the time that you put into it.

"I think Combatives really encourages Soldiers to train. They actually go after their NCOs and ask, 'When you doing Combatives training?' It makes 'em want to go.

"Command support is so important," Sarjeant continues.

"When our Soldiers go anywhere in the Army and they say they're from APG, people know about our Combatives program.

"I want Ordnance Soldiers when they leave here to say, 'Hey, I'm from Aberdeen. We kick butt.

"And if the command supports the program, we're going to have more NCOs taking charge and taking pride in training their Soldiers. These Soldiers leave here and they go to Iraq. And when they get there, I want them to be prepared. I would hate to meet a Soldier and because of something that someone should have taught them, they lose a life or lose a limb.

"Being from the 82nd Airborne and having been a jumpmaster and taking care of everyone in the bird, that stays with me. When I teach, I break this thing down to Barney Fife level. If you can't get it, then I'm not doing my job,



Photo by

Brian Sarjeant trains every aspect of Combatives at APG, including officiating quarterly tournaments.

and I try to break it down some more.

Sarjeant encourages every NCO to at least get Level 1 training.

"I've run Level 1 and 2 classes locally and I get folks coming TDY from Fort Benning and other installations. What I would like to see are folks from here coming to classes.

"Just come to the classes!" he exclaims. "Even if you don't want to teach students, just learn about it, see what the program is. Learn how to defend yourself!"

It's a lifelong commitment to yourself, Sarjeant said.

"You're not going to be at Aberdeen your whole military career. So when you leave here you need a little confidence. When you get in front of Soldiers you need to be confident and this is a confidence builder. I want the command to grab all their Soldiers and ask, 'Are you Level 1 certified? You need to be Level 1 certified.

"And if you're a staff sergeant, you need to learn a little more – go to Level 2.

"The Soldiers right now, at the end of the six weeks' training we give them, they look like the guys I go up against in the national tournaments I compete in. So if they're looking like that, and their NCOs don't know the techniques, then the NCOs are behind the power curve," he said.

Sarjeant also competes in the North American Grappling Association, which he described as "Combatives in a Gi." His Combatives cohorts Ronald Stallings and Ronald Seldon also compete.

"We go from standing to takedown to submission in six-minute rounds with six guys in your division. You leave it all on the mat," Sarjeant said, describing the action.

"We basically want to stay sharp on what we're teaching and have been competing for the past two years, about five or six meets a year."

NAGA meets are usually a weekend affair and Sarjeant and Company have been to meets from Connecticut to Virginia.

"We train twice a week as a team, but my staff and I train everyday. We do circuit training, jump rope, hit the heavy bag, also do some contact. It's a headache, but it's fun."

"Stallings is a ranked fighter. He even goes to the cage and has a 6-1 professional record. He tried out for Ultimate Fighting Championship – he's a beast! He keeps us honest.

Sarjeant sometimes thinks about his post-Army career move.

"At one point I thought I came out of the Army and went right back in doing the same thing. Sometimes it's hard for me to set it apart, to see the difference between being Army and

being civilian because I feel that responsibility, that the job is not over until it's done. I can't go home until they're all trained up.

"It's definitely a passion. A lot of people see it as work, but to me it's just going out there and training. It's like going to the gym and working out, an everyday thing. If I'm teaching a class and it's repetitions, I'll get in there and do it too.

"The thing about Combatives is when you go to school you have to train or you're going to get beat up. So let me train and get good at it so it will be less painful. They tell you 'You learn two ways: you learn by repetition; and you learn thru blunt trauma.' So I took the repetition thing to heart.

It's a passion he passes on to every Soldier he trains.

"The AIT Soldiers don't have much to do while they're here. I think with Combatives you take the focus away from guys getting into trouble and letting them focus on something that's positive.

"I wish when I came up as a private in the Army that I knew what I'm teaching now. I would have had a lot more confidence in a lot of situations if I knew what I knew now.

"I just love the program because I know what it can do for people and I know what it does," Sarjeant professes.

Results quarterly Combatives Tournament sponsored by 61st Ordnance Brigade Nov. 14,15

Super Heavyweight

1st Pvt. Saul Solivan, Company B, 143rd Ord Bn
2nd Pvt. Justin Styn, Company C, 143 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. William Berry, HHC, 143 Ord Bn

Heavyweight

1st Spc. Jason Boruch, Company B, 16 Ord Bn
2nd Pfc. Carlos Carpinaha, Company B, 143 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. Lawrence Poe, Company C, 143 Ord Bn

Light Heavyweight

1st Pfc. Ryan Burbidge, Company B, 143 Ord Bn
2nd Pfc. Craig Hall, Company B, 16 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. Aaron Blackburn, (USMC)

Cruiserweight

1st Pvt. Jose Martinez, Company B, 143 Ord Bn
2nd Pvt. Lance Mitchell, Company C, 16 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. Edan Rose, Company A, 16 Ord Bn

Middleweight

1st Pfc. David Linstrom, Company A, 143 Ord Bn
2nd Pvt. Michael Long, Company C, 143 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. Willie Horn, Company B, 143 Ord Bn

Welterweight

1st Pvt. Giek, Company C, 143 Ord Bn
2nd Pvt. Brett Bourdage, Company B, 16 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. Jeffery Marder, Company B, 143 Ord Bn

Lightweight

1st Pvt. Richard Gonzales, Company B, 143 Ord Bn
2nd Pvt. Adrian Cotton, Company C, 143 Ord Bn
3rd Pfc. Nathaniel Richardson, Company C, 16 Ord Bn

Featherweight

1st Pvt. Nicholas Mullen, USMC
2nd Pvt. Kelley Nicholas, Company A, 16 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. Jeffrey Brust, Company C, 16 Ord Bn

Flyweight

1st Pvt. Matthew Smith, Company A, 143 Ord Bn
2nd Pfc. Anthony Estrada, Company B, 16 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. Jose Sanchez, HHC 143 Ord Bn

WOMEN'S DIVISION

Heavyweight

1st Pvt. Asia Garcia, Company B, 16 Ord Bn
2nd Pfc. Savonta Dubose, Company C, 16 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. Tamerisk Witherspoon, Company B, 143 Ord Bn

Cruiserweight

1st Pvt. Nichole Edgerton, Company C, Ord Bn
2nd Pvt. Morgan Rabe, Company B, 16 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. Judy Cervantes, HHC, 143 Ord Bn

Middleweight

1st Pvt. Jordan Currie, Company B, 143 Ord Bn
2nd Pvt. Sheyla Colon, Company C, 143 Ord Bn
3rd Pfc. Kimberly Lopez, Company B, 16 Ord Bn

Lightweight

1st Pvt. Babilene Terska, Company A, 16 Ord Bn
2nd Pfc. Samantha Ramdass, Company B, 143 Ord Bn
3rd Pvt. Debra Boyce, Company C, 16 Ord Bn

MEN'S PERMANENT PARTY

190 lbs and up

1st 2nd Lt. Jonathon Joseph, Company E, 16 Ord Bn
2nd 2nd Lt. Evan Carey, Company E, 16 Ord Bn

189 lbs

1st Sgt. Herman Baker, Marine Detachment
2nd 2nd Lt. Eric Collier, Company E, 16 Ord Bn
3rd 2nd Lt. David Garcia, Company E, 16 Ord Bn

WOMEN'S PERMANENT PARTY

1st 2nd Lt. J. Hergenroeder, Company E, 16 Ord Bn
2nd 2nd Lt. Ashleigh Davidson, Company E, 16 Ord Bn
3rd 2nd Lt. Samantha Smay, Company E, 16 Ord Bn

BEST BATTALION

143rd Ord Bn (187 total points)
16th Ord Bn (183 total points)

BEST COMPANY

Company B, 143rd Ord Bn